DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 351 610 CE 062 527

TITLE	High School Vocational Education. Low Esteem, Little Clout. Rand Education & Human Resources Program. Policy Brief Issue Number 1.
INSTITUTION	National Center for Research in Vocational Education, Berkeley, CA.; Rand Corp., Santa Monica, Calif.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Vocational and Adult Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Oct 92
NOTE	3p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research/Technical (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Administrator Attitudes; Curriculum Development; *Educational Attitudes; *Educational Improvement; High Schools; *Integrated Curriculum; Negative Attitudes; *Teacher Attitudes; *Track System (Education); *Vocational Education

ABSTRACT

A 2-year, in-depth study of curriculum tracking in three large metropolitan-area high schools found that most high school teachers and administrators hold vocational education in low regard. Such thinking is a barrier to educational reforms proposed to integrate and improve academic and vocational education. Radical changes may be difficult to implement in large, comprehensive high schools with long-standing "tracking" systems, deeply rooted institutional cultures, and other constraints that range from parental or community demands and changing demographics to altered state requirements and resource cuts. The study found that at the three schools' honors and college-preparation courses were at the top in esteem and much of vocational education at the bottom. Vocational curriculum was held in such low esteem that it had practically no effect on curriculum decision making. Among barriers to change were the following: (1) there is a prevalent belief that high school students' abilities and motivation cannot be changed much; (2) almost all high schools act on these beliefs about students' differences by creating a split curriculum designed to accommodate students' various dispositions toward school work, not to alter them; (3) this split curriculum in high schools grants higher status to college-preparation courses, teachers, and students than to vocational courses, teachers, and students; and (4) matching students to courses is often strongly influenced by class, racial, and ethnic stereotypes. The study suggests that the present system is dysfunctional and that the only way to change it is to create a working model that displays a strong integrated curriculum. (KC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED351610

RAND Education & Human Resources Program

ISSUE NUMBER 1 POLICY BRIEF OCTOBER 1992

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

High School Vocational Education

Low Esteem, Little Clout

Most high school teachers and administrators do not think much of vocational education. They do not think very often of it, either. And when they speak of it, the phrase "dumping ground" is often on their lips.

This low opinion of vocational education is deeply embedded in the institutional culture of American high schools. And, in a two-year, in-depth study of curriculum tracking in three large metropolitan-area high schools, RAND researcher and professor of education at UCLA Jeannie Oakes and her associates Molly Selvin, Lynn Karoly, and Gretchen Guiton assert that this ingrained belief is only one of a number of obstacles that must be overcome before proposed educational reforms to integrate and improve academic and vocational education can be achieved.

That high schools need to improve their product, no one denies. Business is demanding workers better able to cope with the technological requirements of an increasingly competitive post-industrial economy. Universities and colleges lament the lack of basic skills in their entrants. States are requiring increased academic work, higher standards, and more accountability from secondary schools. Congress, in the Perkins Act of 1990, mandated improved "educational programs leading to academic and occupational skill competencies needed to work in a technologically advanced society."

In addition to these problems of educational quality, an increasing body of evidence suggests that today's public schools provide differential career preparation for students from different ethnic and social groups. Such differences raise questions about the essential fairness of present-day school curricula.

The notion of integrating academic and vocational education—and improving both—is based on research on how people learn, in and out of school, and on research on the changing nature of work and the needs of future workers. Advocates of integrated curricula propose teaching the abstract concepts of the academic curriculum in the context of the hands-on, problem-solving pedagogy characteristic of vocational classes. They argue that curriculum now thought to be beyond the grasp of some students may be attainable if taught in a more concrete context where students engage in activities that allow them to connect and apply what they learn in the classroom to its out-of-classroom context.

While research concerning the content of new integrated curricula continues, little has been done on the question of how to implement such radical changes within the context of today's large, comprehensive high schools, with long-standing "tracking" systems, deeply rooted institutional cultures, and exogenous constraints that range from parental or community demands and changing demographics to altered state requirements and resource cuts.

Theory and practice

Comprehensive schools are "full-service" schools that offer a wide variety of courses at many different ability levels. Tracking describes the way in which a student's path to graduation is determined by judgments about his or her ability, interests, motivation, and choices and the available curricular offerings. The major subject-matter fork in the tracking system is between academic and vocational studies. Within each of these broad tracks, there are numerous ability forks between, say, honors and midlevel work, or between general and occupation-specific skills. The whole tracking process can be thought of as a series of more or less parallel paths guiding students of widely differing abilities and motivations through four years of education that will prepare them for productive lives. That is the theory.

What Oakes found practiced at the three study schools was more like a vertical filtering process, with honors and college-preparation courses at the top and much of vocational education at the bottom. As a result, the vocational curriculum was held in such low esteem at the three schools that it had practically no effect on curriculum decisionmaking. What drove curriculum policy was the schools' academic offerings and the mechanisms for placing

CE 064 241

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

students of different academic abilities into academic classes at the "right" level. Vocational education functioned largely as a repository for low ability and behavioral problems. As state requirements for academic courses grew and overall school resources shrank, vocational programs suffered, at best, benign neglect; at worst, vocational programs, teachers, and students were held in disdain.

Barriers to change

In its present state, the system of tracking, and the beliefs and pressures supporting it, presents formidable obstacles to curriculum reforms that aim to integrate the academic and vocational sides of high school education. These obstacles reside in the culture of the school. They are found in deeply held and widely shared beliefs about students' intellectual capacities and long-standing structures and traditions that dictate what high schools "ought to be like." Among these obstacles:

- The prevalent belief that, by the time students reach high school, widely varying abilities, motivation, and aspirations of individual students cannot be changed much. Perhaps more pervasive is the view that some students simply are neither motivated nor able to learn rigorous academic ideas. These beliefs work against efforts to integrate academic and vocational studies and suggestions that, under very different conditions, schools can teach all students essential academic concepts.
- Nearly every high school acts on these beliefs about students' differences by creating a split curriculum designed to accommodate students' various dispositions toward schoolwork, not to alter them. They develop separate programs that divide those students thought to be well suited for a college-preparation curriculum from those who are not. This traditional pattern creates a barrier to integration, because it is not only the curriculum that must be changed, but the institutional structure that supports it.
- This split curriculum in high schools does not have separate but equal sides. Higher status goes to college-preparation courses, teachers, and students and lower status to general academic and vocational courses, teachers, and students. These programs are likely to be the first casualties of resource constraints or changes in curricular policies and are often used as a safe haven for students with serious academic or behavioral problems. This unequal status is a barrier to integration, because many on the academic side worry that vocational content, teachers, and students might taint their courses. And many vocational programs are so lacking in resources that they cannot even offer access to high technology to entice academic collaborators.
- The procedures used to match students and courses are not only strongly influenced by students' prior performance and test scores, but by judgments about the ability and motivations of different racial, ethnic, and social class groups. As a result, schools serving low-income minority students tend to be more vocational (and have low-level basic skills) while schools serving more affluent students (particularly whites and Asians) tend to have larger college-preparation programs. Thus, efforts to blend academic and vocational studies may also have to confront stereotypes about what students from different racial and social class groups are like and what they need.

Requirements for reform

While these barriers are deep-set in the high school culture, Oakes found some cause for hope in her extensive interviews with high school faculty and staff at the study schools. Many would welcome curriculum reform if they felt it were possible. Faculty often felt considerable discomfort with the way tracked curriculum and assignment practices promoted class- and race-related differences in course placements. Even those who believe that the present tracked, split curriculum is a necessity were aware of the frustrating breakdowns in the system.

The widespread dissatisfaction with its product suggests that the present dual-track high school curriculum is dysfunctional. Many educational theorists support a strong integration of the academic and vocational curricula as the way to instill both the basic and the generic skills that are now required in the labor force. But, warns Oakes, only convincing experimental demonstrations of the efficacy of such an integration can produce real reform. She and her associates urge research, experimentation, and evaluation of the possibilities of a "strong" integrated curriculum. Until persuasive evidence can overcome present-day beliefs, vocational educators will be consigned in large part to acting out the belief that some children, often poor and minority, are unable to learn the things most valued by schools and society.

This Policy Brief highlights major policy-relevant findings of a research project conducted by RAND for the National Center for Research in Vocational Education. To order the reports on which these findings are based, contact RAND, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138, (310) 393-0411. Please refer to the following publications: Jeannie Oakes et al.,* Educational Matchmaking: Academic and Vocational Tracking in Comprehensive High Schools, *RAND, R-4189-NCRVE/UCB, 1992, and Molly Selvin et al.,* Who Gets What and Why: Curriculum Decisionmaking at Three Comprehensive High Schools, *N-3041-NCRVE/UCB, February 1990.